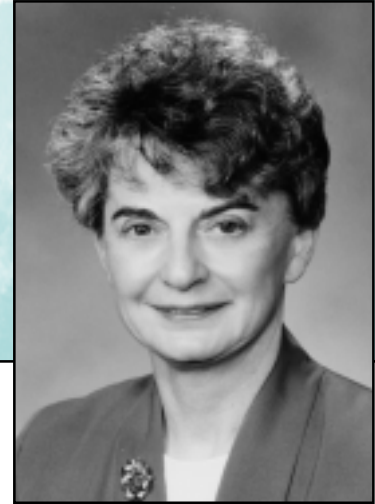


State Representative
**HELEN
SOMMERS**



Reports to the 36th District

Summer 2001

Dear 36th District Resident:

This has been an eventful year for our state and for the Legislature. The Nisqually Earthquake forced us out of the Capitol Building – and the House and Senate chambers – into makeshift meeting rooms. February brought a drought disaster declaration and soaring energy prices. Then the Boeing Company announced it would move its corporate headquarters out of Washington state.

Legislators faced many challenges, including an enormous increase in health care costs, a court decision overturning our popular, open Primary Election system, ballot initiatives increasing funding for K-12 education without providing new revenue, and growing traffic gridlock that requires huge investments in transportation.

Meanwhile, year three of a tied House of Representatives – 49 Democrats and 49 Republicans – slowed progress.

Consequently, we spent almost six months in session, with some successes and some failures.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Helen Sommers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Helen" and last name "Sommers" clearly visible.

Rep. Helen Sommers

Democratic Chair

House Appropriations Committee

K-12 EDUCATION

Education was the big winner in this year's budget. An initiative approved by the voters last November shifted \$400 million to a Student Achievement Fund – providing \$190 more per student this year and \$220 more next year. A second initiative grants most teachers and other school employees across the state a cost-of-living increase based on the Seattle consumer price index. New funding is also provided to reduce class size.

These changes increase the per-pupil funding in Washington's schools from \$4982 in the 1999-01 budget to \$5437 in the 2001-03 biennium. Local levies are in addition to these amounts.

Many of our school districts are facing a teacher shortage and are encountering difficulties recruiting qualified teachers. To help relieve that shortage, new legislation will allow retired teachers to return to teaching for a limited time without losing their pensions. Alternative training programs will encourage interested experts from other professions to move into the classroom as a qualified teacher – facilitating a career change for those who want to teach in the public schools.

State Representative Helen Sommers

NISQUALLY EARTHQUAKE

The epicenter of the February 28 earthquake is just 11 miles from the Capital. Those famous sandstone buildings shook mightily, but survived remarkably well. Much attention and concern was focused on the Legislative Building and its giant dome.

One of the dome's supports was already affected by the 1949 and 1965 quakes, and the building was seismically upgraded after 1965. The engineer who supervised that structural reinforcing came out of retirement to inspect his earlier work – a job credited with saving the building from extensive damage in the 6.8 magnitude quake this year.

For days we watched industrial climbers rappelling up and down, inspecting every section of the dome. One set of stone block supports was knocked out of alignment and will have to be replaced. But I attended a briefing by a seismic engineer who advised us the Legislative Building is one of the safest to be in an earthquake – and the rotunda, under the structural circle of the dome, is the safest of all!

Trivia question: Our capitol dome is one of the tallest in the world. Can you name the three that are higher? (The answer appears at the bottom of the page.)



Workers, suspended from ropes, inspect the Dome for structural damage following the Nisqually earthquake.

FOSTER CARE

About 11,000 children per month are in foster care in our state due to neglect, abuse or abandonment. Child Protective Services is responsible for finding foster homes and monitoring the care of children living in them.

Some of the children in foster care are adopted, but most return to their mothers at some point. Our current foster care system has been criticized for inadequate support for foster parents, causing burn-out and turnover rates that can sometimes result in children being moved from home to home.

This session, we took real steps in our budget to improve this system. We provided more caseworkers and lowered the caseload per worker, increased payment to foster parents, and made better use of child-placing agencies. We also provide better respite care for dedicated foster parents and improve recruitment efforts to bring more foster homes into the system.

Our goal is to provide the best possible care for children who are in the foster care system, and to achieve accreditation from the National Council of Accreditation for Children and Families.

NURSING HOME CARE – ALZHEIMER'S PILOT

The 2001-03 operating budget increased the salaries of long-term care workers in nursing homes and community residential programs, recognizing the increasing need for the critical care they provide. Funding was also approved for a pilot program for persons with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. The program will use community boarding facilities – instead of nursing homes – which are designed and equipped to provide specialized care for these conditions.

IDENTITY THEFT

Washington has the dubious distinction of a top-10 ranking in per-capita cases of identity theft, an old crime made more likely and more damaging by the Internet. Identity thieves can access other people's personal information by the old-fashioned way of running through the victim's garbage – or by the modern way of searching for details on the Internet.

We passed a bill which Attorney General Christine Gregoire calls "the toughest in the nation" to help protect Washington citizens from a crime that, unfortunately, occurs more and more frequently every year. It increases penalties and helps victims re-establish their credit.



Representatives Sommers and Dickerson report for duty as "celebrity composters" at the Interbay P-Patch.

HEALTH CARE AND HEALTH CARE COSTS

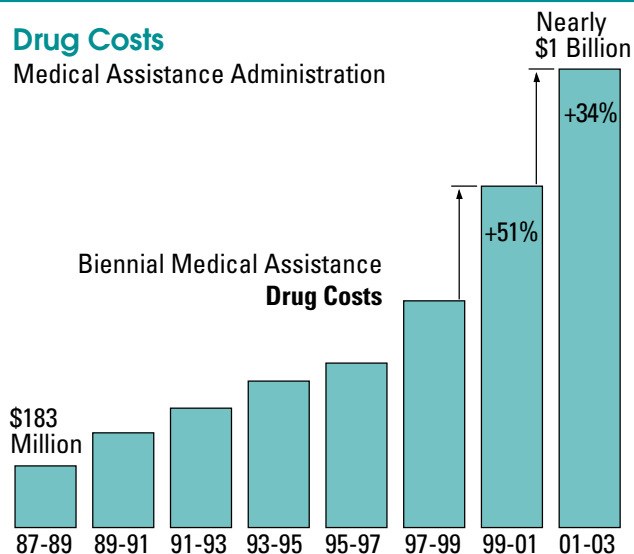
Washington State is a leader in providing health care to low income families and especially to children and seniors. In recent years, we have expanded eligibility to the federal Medicaid program, increasing the numbers covered from about 400,000 in 1990 to over 800,000 at present. The state and federal government each pay about half the costs, totaling almost \$6 billion in our 2001-2003 operating budget.

Medical research is making wonderful lifesaving advances. New miracle drugs are extending and enhancing life. But soaring costs are an enormous challenge. Our medical assistance budget increased 31% in the last two years.

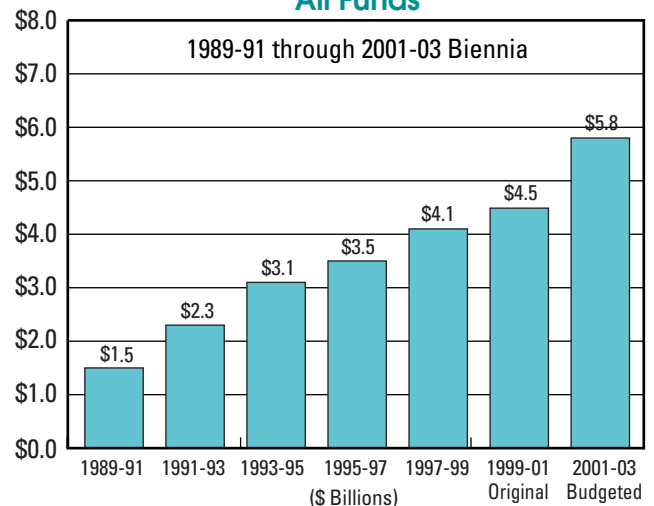
The graphs show the change in total cost and in prescription drug costs.

Drug Costs

Medical Assistance Administration



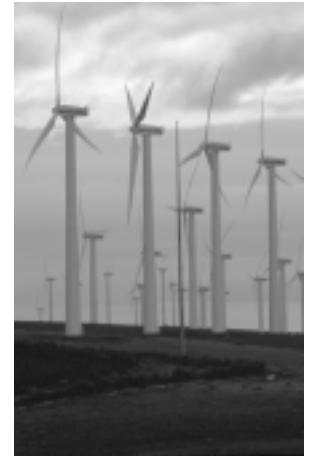
Medical Assistance Expenditure Growth All Funds



WATER AND THE DROUGHT

Remember how it hardly rained last November? And how we enjoyed so many pleasant and clear winter days? Well, this year we recorded one of the lowest rainfall/snowfall in history, and June's three inches – double the normal – didn't help much.

We have few tools to mitigate the negative impacts, especially on agriculture in Eastern Washington and on our famous hydropower. We made some changes to our antiquated water law such as tax breaks to promote conservation and reuse; more flexible use of existing water rights; streamlining the application process to acquire a new water-right, or change a use; and encouraging temporary water "donations" to improve flow and benefit fish. Tax exemptions may help develop power generation from renewable sources – those giant windmills in the Palouse are becoming a second income for some farmers – lowering our dependency on hydropower.



UNFINISHED BUSINESS: TRANSPORTATION

The Legislature has failed to approve a transportation funding proposal. I believe making investments in transportation is a major and critical responsibility and I am deeply disappointed in the stalemate. Replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct and many other projects desperately need funding.

We must increase mobility in order to maintain a healthy economy and retain the good-paying jobs we enjoy in the high tech and biotech industries. A Boeing spokeswoman made clear, "The Boeing Company is heavily dependent on a transportation system that works." And our individual quality of life is dependent on achieving reasonable commutes for work and recreation.

I have never made a partisan criticism in all the years I have written a legislative report. This year is different. The House is in a 49-49 tie between Democrats and Republicans and any major new funding proposal needs clear support from both. A transportation tax and spending plan was negotiated by both Democrats and Republicans from the House and Senate, and the Governor. But then the House Republicans refused to give the votes necessary to approve the revenues.

Therefore we failed in this most important action. No funding for the Viaduct or to relieve congestion on I-5. No funding for improvements to I-405 or the Evergreen Point Bridge. Our future economy needs these investments.